

I Saw, I Desired, I Took

Research shows that across all wealth categories in postmodern culture, religion and money are connected. Lisa Keister, associate professor of sociology, Ohio State University found that the median net worth of Jews was \$150,890 while conservative Christians were the least, \$26,200.¹ Why? At first glance it could be that conservative Christians look forward to a future life while the Jewish faith does not emphasize the world beyond. The relationship between religion and money becomes even more entwined and complex within the concept of world progress which states that as society speeds up we naturally accumulate more and more stuff. However, the mathematics of the concept of world progress cannot explain our cultures' exponential growth or the speed at which we accumulate stuff.²

Does having plenty of money make a person happy? In his book Arthur Brooks summarizes the number issue by stating that "my money only makes me happy when I notice that I am richer than you. Or that you are poorer than me, of course."³ In order to stay happy with this mind set I must always get more stuff that requires me to spend more money and that proves that I have more than you do.⁴ Let's suppose that you are hopelessly unhappy and there is absolutely nothing that anyone can do to make you happy. Imagine that I come and give you \$100,000 with no strings attached, completely free, it's yours. Research indicates that your happiness would only increase by 3%. In studies people were asked how much more money per month they needed to get by, and regardless of income level, people always felt that they needed about 40% more than what they were making in order to get by. Money proves to be a poor measurement of happiness unless someone perhaps comes from extreme poverty.⁵

Whether or not you agree with the research findings, the fact remains that money intersects practically everything we do. We spend most of our day working in exchange for

¹ Lisa Keister, http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1272/is_2703_132/ai_111403491/

² Dr. Richard Swenson, General Session at 2011 Christian Leadership Alliance Convention, Dallas, TX.

³ Arthur C. Brooks, *Gross National Happiness*, 2008, p.120-123.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid, p. 117-119.

money and then we complain that there is not enough time to spend it. If we have time to spend it then we complain that we don't have enough money to spend on what we really want. In spite of our complaints most of us do somehow find a way to use our money to provide a comfortable life style and adequate amounts of food. Plus we do generally have our needs covered and can spend something on our wants too. And if you don't feel that you have enough the credit card or cards are ever handy to keep the pursuit of the good life going. An interesting survey of women found that only their concern and interest for the happiness and success of their children was more important to them than having enough money.⁶

Benjamin Franklin, who's picture adorns our hundred dollar bill, first promulgated the idea that time is money. More recently economics professor Ian Walker has made a mathematical formula for finding out exactly how much your time is worth.⁷ Some people convert their athletic ability into money by excelling at many different types of sports. Some lawyers can command large fees based on their record of winning case after case. We all play our part in a society that operates and depends on each of us, as consumers, spending money. If the money is not spent the economy slows. There is no denying the power and pleasure that money provides. Money and the process of making a living, is not in itself wrong. Ellen White states that "time is money, and many are wasting precious time which might be used in useful labor, working with their hands the thing that is good."⁸ So it is not money itself or the making of money that is inherently wrong but rather the way that we misuse money or let money making take control of our lives.

How are we as stewards of God's possessions influenced by wealth? Here are two biblical examples to remember. Eve made a terrible decision in the Garden of Eden. "When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband,

⁶ http://www.bettyconfidential.com/ar/ld/a/women_want_money.html (Retrieved 7/227, 2011)

⁷ The formula is: $V = (W((100-t)/100))/C$, where V is the value of an hour, W is a person's hourly wage, t is the tax rate and C is the local cost of living. http://articles.cnn.com/2002-05-29/tech/time.money_1_pence-formula-average-cost?_s=PM:TECH

⁸ Ellen G. White, *Counsels on Stewardship*, p. 288.

who was with her, and he ate it.”⁹ For Eve the fall was progressive. She saw, she desired, and she took. Achan followed the same progression. “When I saw in the plunder a beautiful robe from Babylonia, two hundred shekels of silver and a wedge of gold weighing fifty shekels, I coveted them and took them. They are hidden in the ground inside my tent, with the silver underneath.”¹⁰ Achan saw, he coveted and he took.

The progression taken by Eve resulted in disaster for the humanity and the outcome of Achan’s progression resulted in the loss of his life and his family’s lives. Eve could not resist the allurements of pleasure and Achan caved in to a beautiful garment and a wedge of silver. This progression of, I saw, I coveted, I took, is a very slippery slope for the Christian steward living in a post modern culture. The progression is so innocent and subtle that the magnitude of the outcome can be overlooked or not perceived.

There is no doubt that Eve and Achan were enamored by what they saw. They wanted it. That desire blurred their judgment and the decision was made to take it. I think of Jack, our pet Golden doodle, he will pull on his leash so hard that it will start to cut off his air supply, all because he sees and wants the squirrel that I as his master know he cannot catch. Only when I get his attention will he stop pulling. Eve and Achan did not see their progression and the enormity that each step had in the final decision made. The Bible gives us counsel about the things of this world including the desire for wealth and how they can blur our spiritual eyesight. “For all that *is* in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world.”¹¹

Many years ago I heard an old gospel song. The names of the author and performer have been forgotten but, I have never forgotten the opening verse because it shows how happiness can be found.

⁹ Genesis 3:6 (NIV)

¹⁰ Joshua 7:21 (NIV)

¹¹ 1 John 2:16

Everyone wants to be happy
Everyone wants to be free
Everyone wants to be someone
On this we all can agree
But how can I ever be happy
How can I ever be free?
I asked myself this question
And a voice keeps calling to me.
You will never find complete peace of mind until you find the Lord.

We all want and have the desire to be happy, free and someone. In this world money, with its promise of pleasure and wealth, is presented as the way to this happiness, freedom and identity, but the progression to and the acceptance of materialism has far reaching negative results. In God's way of thinking you cannot obtain happiness, freedom or find your identity by following the progression of, I see, I want, I take. We only find these things when we accept Jesus as Lord and Savior. As a steward and in our stewardship of God's possessions, we find happiness not in the money and pleasures of this world but in seeing Jesus, wanting Jesus and taking Jesus.